

Celebrating Our Lord

Christmas



Prayer Starter

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...

Dear Lord, thank you for sending your Son to us. We learn from him how you love us and how to find our way to your grace. Help us to understand his teachings and live them every day. We celebrate his birthday and the joy you brought to the world that day. Amen.

Daily Bread

At the time right before Jesus' birth, the emperor asked everyone to pay their taxes in the city where they were born. This was bad news for Joseph and Mary, because Joseph had been born in Bethlehem and they would have to travel over 50 miles from where they lived to get there. In those days, you had to walk or ride a donkey or camel to get places. Traveling that far by foot would take days. Mary was expecting a baby, so this journey was very hard for her.

When they arrived in Joseph's hometown, there was nowhere for them to stay. All the rooms in the hotels were full because so many people were visiting to pay their taxes.

They had to sleep inside a stable with the animals.

Soon after they got to the stable, Jesus was born. Joseph and Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, which is a small box that is usually used as a feeding dish for horses and cows.

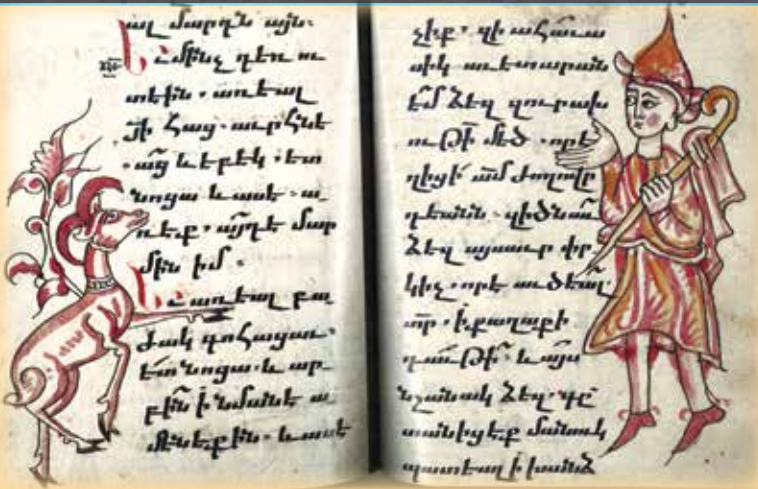
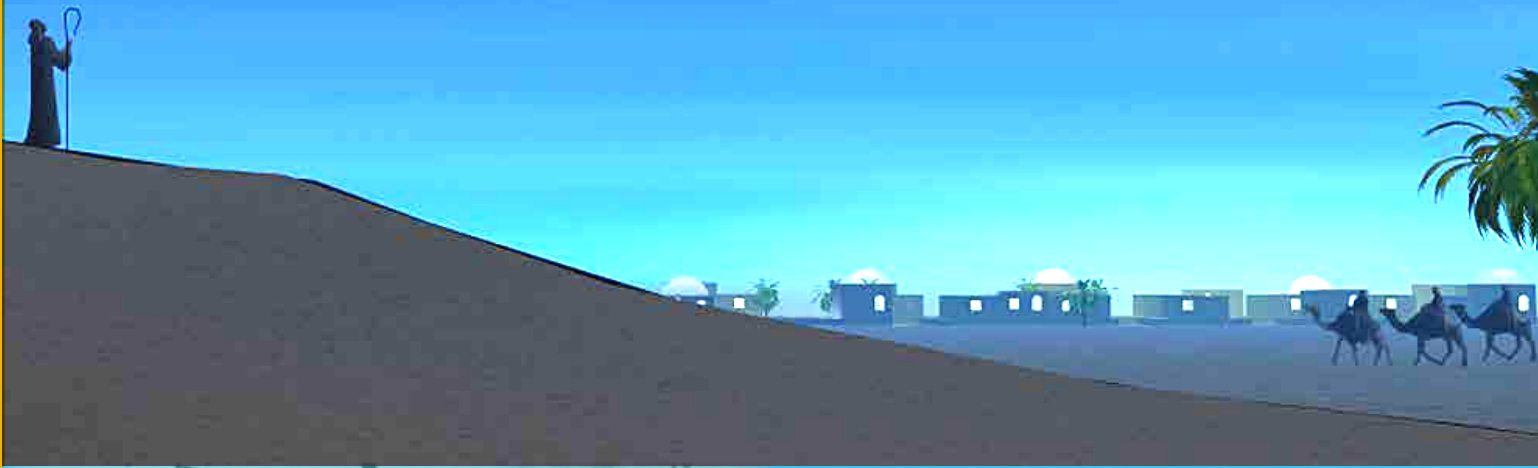
A few hours later, Mary and Joseph were interrupted from their rest when shepherds arrived at the stable. At first, Mary and Joseph did not understand why they were there. But the shepherds explained how angels told them about this special child that was sent by God and told them where to find him.

The same night that Jesus was born, a star appeared in the sky over Bethlehem. In the East, three wise men were watching. They knew this was special and that a great king was born that night.



Each decided to leave his own country and follow the star so they could give gifts to the new king. They had three gifts: frankincense, myrrh, and gold.

Both frankincense and myrrh are types of incense that smell good and were used for many different reasons in those days, including for religious ceremonies. This was a symbolic gift to wish good health and a happy life to the child. The other gift of gold was to help Jesus' family take care of him as he grew up. Today, it would be like giving money.



SCRIPTURE SOURCE

"While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they

were terrified! But the angel said: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord!" *Luke 2:6-11*

This quote from the Bible is one of the most beautiful and mystical in the New Testament. Even though this baby Jesus was being born in a stable to a poor family, he was the one who would change the world. The angel told the shepherds this to begin spreading the good news of the love that can fill each of us inside, even today.

In the Armenian Tradition

Every year, Christmas celebrated on December 25th is a lot of fun. Sometimes, we spend too much of our thoughts and energy on shopping, getting gifts, and having parties and the real point of Christmas gets lost in the shuffle. We spent time on this very topic in our lesson on Advent.

We are lucky that we, as Armenians, have a quieter time after the rush of the American holiday season to really pay attention and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and how his presence on earth changed everything. We celebrate the birth of Christ on January 6th along with his baptism by John the Baptist. A baptism is like a spiritual birth, a birth into a life with God. By being baptized, Jesus gave us all an example of how to begin a life as a child of God.

We call the day the Feast of Theophany. There are three special services that are traditionally done around this Feast.

Jrakalouyts Divine Liturgy (the lighting of the lamps service)

First, we have a Christmas Eve service on January 5th. People hold candles during the service to symbolize how Jesus' birth on earth brought the light of God's love to us.

Feast of Theophany Services

Then on January 6th we have a special Christmas day Badarak service. At the end of the Badarak, we have another ceremony called "The Blessing of the Water."

During this ceremony, the cross is dipped in water, just as Christ entered the Jordan River and was baptized by his cousin, John the Baptist. Blessed oil, called *muron*, is poured into the water from a dove-shaped container, just as is done at baptisms.

At the end of the ceremony, members of the congregation take home some of the blessed water. Drinking the blessed water helps us to remember that Jesus was baptized for a reason - to show that he planned to share his love with the world and teach us God's will.

Home Blessings

Home Blessings are usually requested at this time of the year. Every family can invite the priest to come to their home and perform the blessing. The family provides bread (a symbol of the Word of God), salt (a symbol of the things that give our life 'taste' or meaning), and water (the most important element of life).

The priest brings a *nushkhar* wafer and incense. He blesses the bread, the water and the salt. These three fundamental elements are essential life-giving gifts for human life. The priest asks God to bless the home and the people who live there. He prays for God to provide for them, physically and spiritually, so they have enough to eat, live well, and have grace and love in their lives.



CELEBRATE WITH GOD

Create a Birthday
Card for Jesus!



BIBLE BYTES

Swaddling cloths *For centuries, in almost every culture all over the world, mothers have wrapped new-born babies in narrow strips of cloth or some kind of blanket in a very tight way. They all end up looking like a burrito with a cute head coming out the top. The idea is to make them feel just like they did when they were crowded inside their mother – warm and having something close up against their skin. The act of wrapping babies this way is called “swaddling.” Our Armenian great grand-mothers would have done this as well.*

Well Versed

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among all people. . .”

Luke 2:14

Muron is made by the Catholicos at Holy Etchmiadzin in Armenia. It is made of olive oil, balsam and forty different flowers and herbs. The Catholicos along with many Armenian bishops make it and bless it. Then some of it is sent to every Armenian church in the whole world.



When your church gets some, it is put into a special, small, dove-shaped pitcher. Then, your priest will use the *Muron* during the blessing of the water ceremony on the Feast of Theophany. He also uses it at all baptisms and chrismations. Your priest probably touched you with the blessed *muron* at your baptism and chrismation when you were a baby.



Family Focus

Today, the children discussed the meaning of Christmas and the Feast of Theophany. They learned details about when, where, and how Jesus was born and compared it with the details of their own births. It was a fun discussion. We celebrated the fact that we, as Armenians, get to have two Christmases, and we looked at the distinct Armenian services connected with Christmas.

Living Your Faith

- Look at the “Me and Jesus” handout your child filled in and discuss it together. You will certainly be able to add to the information!
- Armenian Home Blessings are traditionally performed around Christmastime. Request a home blessing from your priest and create a special time for your family to make the connection between your church and your home.

the calendar square about what they can do that day to be a better disciple of Jesus. Ask them if they can think of an example now. Suggestions:

- help my parent wash the dishes
- read the Bible
- be nice to a kid at school who is not already my friend
- give food to a soup kitchen
- pray
- donate clothes to people who need it

Tell students that they should definitely ask their parents to help them with this part of the advent calendar and ask their parents to join them in doing many of the things that they list on the calendar over the next several weeks.

7. Clean-up and remind students to share the **Family Focus** section of the lesson at home as well as the sidebars of the lesson. Close with the following prayer: “Dear Lord, now that we have our advent calendar, help us to remember to look at it every day and do something good each day in preparation for celebrating your amazing birth and baptism. We want to use this time to become closer to you. Amen.” Dismiss the class. 25 min.



Key Concepts

1. The Feast of Nativity and Theophany is a celebration of the birth of Jesus and his baptism as an adult.
2. Armenians celebrate these two life- and history-changing events on the same day, January 6.

Objectives

During this session students will

1. Read about and discuss Jesus’ birth.
2. Fill in a worksheet comparing his birth with their own.
3. Learn about distinctive Armenian Christmas traditions such as Jrakalouytz and Home Blessing
4. Make a Birthday Card for Jesus.

Materials Needed

- Tray with a dish and a slice of bread on it, a little dish with salt, and a glass of water (see procedure # 7; optional: a nushkhar wafer and some incense).
- Have this on your desk as children arrive and if they ask questions, tell them that they’ll find out about it during today’s class!
- Construction paper for making a greeting card
- Old Christmas cards
- Glue
- Pens, crayons and markers
- Copies of the “Jesus and Me” worksheet (Appendix)

Note to the Teacher

It is very important that you do a run-through of next week’s craft activity *before* the lesson. You might also want to have an assistant on hand that day. This is a lesson best taught at or near the beginning of Great Lent.

Procedure

1. Welcome the students and say the opening prayer together. 5 min.
2. Stand in front of the blackboard and tell students that you think they have certainly heard the story of Jesus’ birth before. Ask them what they remember about the story. Have each child say one thing they remember about the story and write the general phrase on the board. For example, one child might say, “There was no room at the inn for them.” “Jesus was born in a stable.” Allow each child to say something. If you are not getting an enthusiastic response, ask leading questions: “Who was Jesus’ mother? Where was he born – in a hotel?” Etc. Make it fun.

Then ask them, “Did you ever wonder about some of the details in the story, like how did Mary and Joseph get to Bethlehem? Why did Jesus have to be born in a barn? What exactly *is* a “manger?”” Tell them that you are going to answer some of those questions right now. Have each child read a paragraph aloud from **Daily Bread** and **Scripture Source**. After they have read, say to them, “We are going to use this story to compare the birth of Jesus with our own.” 10 min.

3. Hand out the “**Jesus and Me**” **Worksheet** and

pencils or markers. Tell the children that there were many things about Jesus' time that were very different from today. Ask them to fill out the worksheet. (They can look back at the **Daily Bread** section of the lesson for guidance.) 5 min.

4. Share children's answers. Guidelines for discussion:

- City I was born in. . . : Answer for Jesus – Bethlehem.

Ask them to share what city they were born in. After they have each said the city (or neighborhood), ask them to think about whether the city they were born in was the same place where their parents or their grandparents lived. Is it the same city they live in now?

- I was born in a . . . : Answer for Jesus – stable or barn.

Most likely the children in your class were born in a hospital or a birthing center. Someone may have been born at home with a midwife. Discuss how now, when babies are born, we know it is very important for the room where they are born to be very, very clean and also to have other people there who know about births, such as a doctor, nurse, or midwife, to make sure the mom and the baby stay healthy. Point out to them how Mary had to be in a very humble place without the help of a professional who knew a lot about births. Of course, this was not unusual at that time. Joseph was the only one there to help her.

- After I was born, I was visited by. . . : Answer for Jesus – shepherds and wise men from the east. The children were probably visited by the friends and family of their parents and their grandparents. Often, the priest comes to visit a new born baby, too. Jesus was probably visited by family and friends too but their special visitors are the only ones mentioned in the Bible.

- If my family had to travel someplace 50 miles away, we would . . . Answer for Jesus – walk or ride a donkey.

The children can answer that they would drive in a car or take a train to travel that far. They might even say that they could take other, more fun or unusual forms of transportation, such as a helicopter.

- When I was born, my mother dressed me in . . . : Answer for Jesus – swaddling cloths
Possible answers for the children could include a t-shirt, a onesy, a blanket, a cap for their head.

Ask the children if anyone knows what “swaddling cloths” are? Ask one of the children to read aloud the **Bible Bytes** sidebar to the class. After the reading is finished, tell them when they were babies, they were probably “swaddled” with a little baby blanket just like that. 15 min.

5. “Now that we understand the way Jesus was born, we can talk about how we celebrate his birthday.” Tell them that we, as members of the Armenian Church, are extra lucky, because we get to celebrate Christmas twice! Read aloud the first two paragraphs of **In the Armenian Tradition**. 5 min.

6. Remind the children that they were baptized as babies, but Jesus didn't get baptized until he was an adult. That was the beginning of his ministry, when he began to preach to people and show them the way to God. Before he was baptized, he did not do that. Then continue with the description of Christmas services.

7. Next, teach or read the **Home Blessings** section. Tell the children that a home blessing is very special. Ask if they have ever had a home blessing at their house. If someone has, ask them to describe it to the class. What happened during the blessing? What did they do after the blessing? If you have had one, describe your home blessing to the children. If nobody has had one, tell them that this is usually how a home blessing goes:

“The family prepares the house for the special guest of their priest, by making sure it's clean and tidy. The priest will have given them a copy of what he is going to say and do, so the family will be ready to be a part of the blessing. They put a good piece of bread, some salt in a small dish, and a glass of water onto a tray (here's where you point to your display tray) or directly on the table. When the priest comes to the house, the family welcomes him. Everyone stands around the table. The priest will have with him a special nushkhar wafer, which he places next to the bread, salt and water. He will light incense, like the incense they have in church and then he will begin a special prayer and sing a special hymn. The blessing ceremony is not very long – only about 15 minutes. Then the family might all share a meal with the priest or just have some refreshments.”

After the descriptions of home blessings are finished, say to the children: “Now we are going to do for Jesus what we do for everyone else’s birthday! We are going to make a birthday card for him.”

8. Distribute construction paper and markers/crayons. Fold the paper to make the shape of a card and have the children decorate the cover to reflect something they know about Jesus and his birth and/or his baptism. They can cut up pieces of old Christmas cards that you have displayed on your desk. 15 min.
9. Invite the students to share the **Family Focus** with their parents. Close with this prayer: “Dear God our Father, thank you for sending your Son to earth to share your love and teach us about kindness. Help me remember this time for what it really is: an expression of your love through the birth of our Lord and Savior. Amen.” Dismiss the class. 5 min.

UNIT
3
Lesson
Three

Celebrating Our Lord

Great Lent

Key Concepts

1. Great Lent is a forty-day period of preparation for the greatest feast of the church, Easter.
2. The paradigm for our Lenten “retreat” is Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil.
3. Great Lent is a time to become closer to God and be transformed into better disciples.
4. We experience the Sundays of Great Lent to understand our relationship with God.

Objectives

During this session students will

1. Explore the basic components of the season of Great Lent.
2. Review the story of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness.
3. Learn about St. Gregory of Narek and his world-renowned *Lamentations*.
4. Create a chrysalis with a butterfly in it to symbolize the kind of transformation that we

can go through during Lent.

5. Discuss how to say simple prayers at home.

Materials Needed

Bible
Scissors
Newspapers to cover desks
Green tissue paper cut into 3” squares
Toilet paper rolls or paper towel rolls, cut into three inch long rolls
Liquid glue and glitter or Sparkle Mod Podge (available at craft stores)
Small bowls or paper cups
Sponge brushes (one for each child)
String or twine
Small butterflies from the floral section of the craft store or homemade from felt or paper

Note to the Teacher

Next week’s lesson on Easter includes a number of Bible readings. It might be interesting and entertaining to have these stories “performed” or read aloud by volunteers from either parents or an older class.

Procedure

1. Welcome the students and say the opening prayer together.
2. Tell the children that this week is the beginning of Great Lent. Great Lent is a very important time in the Christian calendar because it is the time of preparation to celebrate the most important Christian holiday – Easter. Explain that Lent is a general term for the season of fasting and preparation before a feast. But because Easter is the greatest feast, we call the Lent that precedes it “Great” Lent. Say to them, “Great Lent has a history.” Read the first two paragraphs in #1 of **Daily Bread**. Then tell children: “Let’s learn about Jesus’ temptations directly from the Bible.” Read **Scripture Source**. Then continue with **Daily Bread**. Ask the children what they think they might give up during Great Lent this year or what positive things they might try to do – allow all answers. 10 min.
3. After you have discussed what each of you will change for Lent, tell them that the true importance of this effort is to become closer to God. Say to them, “There are many ways to become closer to